DROWSED WITH THE FUME OF POPPIES: OPIUM AND JOHN KEATS

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CURRENT interest in hallucinogenic drugs prompts reappraisal of the effects of older drugs, as the narcotic experience of each new generation recapitulates that of past generations. Although such ancient physicians as Dioscorides, Avicenna, Caelius Aurelianus, Paulus Aegineta, and Isidore of Seville were familiar with the toxic and narcotic effects of "poppy and mandragora," they were not acquainted with hallucinogenic effects. It is not beyond conjecture that addiction and drug-induced hallucinations may be culturally determined and of relatively recent origin. The first accounts by physicians of the effects of an hallucinogenic drug on imagery and ideation were by S. Weir Mitchell[1] and Havelock Ellis[2] who, at the turn of the century, reported their sensations after ingesting crude extracts of mescal buttons. However, medical reporting was preceded by literary reportage by almost a century. Meyer Abrams[3] has analyzed the effects of opium, taken as laudanum, on the writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas DeQuincey, George Crabbe, and Francis Thompson. Significantly, the title of Abrams's illuminating thesis is *The Milk of Paradise*, a phrase taken from the last line of Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*, a poem composed under the direct influence of opium. The received legend is that a fortuitous caller interrupted the poet while he was writing; his drug-induced trance vanished, and he was never able to recapture the mood.

In the middle of the 19th century Théophile Gautier[4] and Charles Baudelaire[5] related their hallucinatory experiences with hashish, and Baudelaire's *Les Paradis Artificiels* came to occupy a position in French letters analogous to DeQuincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* as the *locus classicus* of the narcotic experience. In our own century Jean Cocteau[6] and Aldous Huxley[7, 8] have reported their reactions following the use of purified opium extract and mescaline respectively. The past decade has witnessed a proliferation of reports of the effects

of such hallucinogens as psilocybin, *d*-lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), and dimethyl-tryptamine (DMT) by laymen, litterateurs, social scientists, as well as by psychiatrists and other physicians.

It is of interest that three British poets who used opium also had medical training: George Crabbe, Francis Thompson, and John Keats. None of them attempted a systematic, objective account of his drug experiences; it is revealed in their poetry. Abrams'[3] analysis of the effects of opium on the imagery of Crabbe and Thompson makes it unnecessary to add more than a few additional comments to a synoptic view of their problems, but Keats' occasional use of opium and its effect on his poems are not well known, and will occupy the major portion of this study.

Within a permissible latitude of individual differences in response, drug-induced hallucinations have many features in common, regardless of the specific drug used. The intensity and duration of the hallucinations seem to vary roughly with the dosage and the frequency with which the drug is taken. Disorientation in space and time is common to most of these hallucinations; conception of both space and time becomes distorted, usually expanded, and apparently infinite. Roger Dupouy[9] writes "*Le temps n'existe plus, l'espace est illimité. . . .*," a curious echo of DeQuincey's observation that "Space swelled, and was amplified to an extent of unutterable and self-repeating infinity. This disturbed me very much less than the vast expanse of time." Visual hallucinations are frequent, ranging from a simple intensification of perception to perceptions of scintillating bright lights, from strange, unidentifiable objects with glowing, gemlike coloration to recognizable images of fountains, streams, castles, and exotic, brightly colored landscapes. Even Huxley,[7] who describes himself as a "poor visualizer," possibly the result of his iritis, states: "mescaline raises all colors to a higher power and makes the percipient aware of innumerable fine shades of difference, to which, at ordinary times, he is completely blind." Auditory and olfactory hallucinations are less frequent and less striking, but Gautier[4] heard identifiable musical selections, and Ellis[2] felt himself to be in a garden with strange flowers and surrounded by a mysterious, unidentifiable scent. Synesthesia of images is not infrequent; colored visions may assume a tactile quality; sounds may be perceived as colors. The visual, auditory, and olfactory images change rapidly. Ellis[2] speaks of "a constant succession of self-evolving visual

imagery," which he compares to images produced by a kaleidoscope.

Ideational content may be seriously affected. With mild to moderate dosage of opium, especially if not taken regularly, there is blunting of the sensorium, often accompanied by a sense of depersonalization and deanimation of hallucinated objects. Individuals with strong religious interests may have mystical experiences; typical of this effect are Huxley's "beatific vision . . . being-awareness-bliss," the religious poems of Francis Thompson, and the emphasis on certain Oriental religious practices by persons who use LSD. High doses and addiction may elicit dreams of terror, as in the examples of Crabbe, DeQuincey, and Thompson; such dreams usually contain ideas of persecution and flight. Addiction rarely occurs in individuals with a strong, well-structured personality but is common in those with poorly socialized, dependent personalities. Currently, the occurrence of psychoses marked by hallucinations and aggressive or self-destructive behavior in those who use LSD is reported with increasing frequency in the public as well as in the medical press. However, even single, isolated doses within the therapeutic range may produce transient dreamlike states with mild to moderate hallucinatory effects.

George Crabbe

George Crabbe (1754-1832) first came to public notice in 1783 when he published his poem, *The Village*, a work of social realism written as a corrective to Goldsmith's roseate view of rural life in *The Deserted Village*. Crabbe had been born in poverty in Aldeburgh, a small coastal town in Suffolk. In 1770 his father had apprenticed him to an apothecary-surgeon who used him chiefly as an errand boy and farm laborer and made him sleep with the stable-boy. In 1775 he set out for London "to acquire a little surgical knowledge as cheaply as possible." He then returned to Aldeburgh, where he became the ill-paid assistant to the local surgeon. When the latter moved away, Crabbe attempted to take over the practice but failed miserably. Unable to earn even a subsistence wage as a surgeon-apothecary, he set out in 1780 for London and a literary career. After some struggles he obtained patronage from Charles Manners, duke of Rutland, through the intercession of Edmund Burke, who recognized his merits and introduced him to the leading figures in London's literary world. At

Burke's instigation, Crabbe applied for holy orders, was ordained deacon in 1781, and priest in 1782. He became chaplain to the duke of Rutland and was awarded an LL.B. degree by John Moore, archbishop of Canterbury, to qualify him for further preferments. After the duke's untimely death in 1787 he was presented to a suitable rural curacy.

Crabbe did not begin to use opium until 1790, a decade after he had stopped practicing medicine. The drug was prescribed by a physician whose diagnosis of a fit of vertigo and syncope was that of a digestive disturbance. The respectable rural clergyman-poet continued to take laudanum daily, probably in moderate doses, without apparent ill effect on his constitution for 42 years. His mental powers remained unimpaired and his interpersonal relations did not suffer. In fact, it was his wife, not he, who developed a profound mental depression after the successive death of five of their seven children in the 1790's; her depressive psychosis lasted until her death in 1813. Crabbe's literary gifts did not lie fallow between 1785 and 1807, but during this period he published nothing. Periodically, he would hold an "incremation" at which he and his two surviving children would burn his manuscripts.

In 1807 Crabbe returned to poetry with the publication of a volume titled *Poems*, which includes among others a dramatic *scena*, "Sir Eustace Grey." Abrams[3] has analyzed this poem as well as another (of uncertain date) titled *The World of Dreams* and has demonstrated their hallucinatory content. However, even more revealing is additional information about Crabbe's dream life and its relation to his somewhat better-known poems *Peter Grimes* and *Ellen Orford* (1810). Benjamin Britten's opera, *Peter Grimes*, incorporates material from both these narratives, and their substance is currently familiar. René Huchon[10] quotes the evidence from Edward Fitzgerald of *Rubáiyát* fame, a close friend of Crabbe's son and a frequent visitor, about one of Crabbe's recurrent dreams:

> He was troubled with strange dreams: in one of them he thought he was followed and hooted at by a set of boys, whom he tried to beat off with a stick, but to no purpose, because they were made of leather! He would sometimes reply, when he was asked whether he had slept well, "The leatherlads have been at me again."

While we have no information about Crabbe's psychosexual development other than that he was made to sleep with the stable boy, the implications of this dream content are undeniable. Only in recent years

have we come to recognize the nature of leather as a fetish object in homosexuality and sadomasochism. The symbol of being pursued by a gang of boys dressed in leather and trying vainly to beat them off with a stick suggests a rather complex but distinctly abnormal set of sexual desires released into dream content under the influence of a narcotic, yet sufficiently under control of the dream censor to be modified.

Ellen Orford features incest and the seduction of a feeble-minded girl, but *Peter Grimes* is a sordid and tragic tale of overt sadism with latent homosexuality. Grimes is depicted as an unmarried fisherman who leads a solitary life, who has broken off relations with his family and is somewhat alienated from the society in which he lives. After his father's death he hires a series of young apprentices, whom he beats and starves. The first apprentice dies of starvation; the second, Grimes insists, fell from the main mast into the hold; the third was a boy "of manners soft and mild" of whom Crabbe says:

> Passive he labour'd, till his slender frame
> Bent with his loads, and he at length was lame;
> Strange that a frame so weak could bear so long
> The grossest insult and the foulest wrong.

Although Grimes is acquitted of criminal charges, he goes mad and is haunted by hallucinations and dreams of terror. He sees the spectre of his father rise from the waters, holding "a thin pale boy in either hand." They glide on top of the salt water without touching it and vanish when Grimes brandishes an oar at them. At a second manifestation the vision is enriched by an act of retribution from the father, an image of blood-guilt, and opium-induced synesthesia:

> He, with his hand, the old man, scoop'd the flood,
> And there came flame about him mix'd with blood;
> He bade me stoop and look upon the place,
> Then flung the hot-red liquor in my face.

Relentless, the spectral vision recurs and continues to haunt Grimes until his dying day, much as the leather lads haunted Crabbe's dreams. It would seem that Crabbe was astute enough to keep his opium usage within reasonable bounds; the price he paid for his habituation was a recurrent dream of terror and pursuit, and some of his poems do reflect elements of hallucinated imagery as well as narrative elements traceable to intrapsychic conflicts.

Francis Thompson

In contrast to Crabbe's quiet life and moderate habituation, the life of Francis Thompson (1859-1907) was that of an overt psychopath and known addict. Like Coleridge, DeQuincey, and Crabbe, Thompson's first use of opium was by medical prescription. In 1879, then almost 21 years old and ostensibly a medical student at Manchester, he had an attack of "lung fever" for which laudanum was prescribed. Finding it pleasant, he continued taking it and, within a few months, by the time of his mother's death in 1880, was habituated. There is abundant evidence of his unstable, withdrawn, schizoid personality prior to this period.

Born the son of converts to Roman Catholicism, his father a successful homeopathic physician in Ashton-under-Lyme, Thompson was brought up with his sisters in a "hot-house atmosphere of provincial piety."[11] Debarred by his religion from having friends among his peers, Thompson developed a rich fantasy life, and came to accept his interior fantasies as reality. Unable to relate to the give and take of the boys' college at Ushaw, where he was sent at the age of 11, he took refuge in writing poetry "as a means of escape and self-dramatization . . . a repository of dreams and a confessional." His parents had sent him to Ushaw to see if he could qualify for the priesthood, but the fathers decided that his inadequate personality disqualified him from attempting pastoral duties. At the age of 18, in 1877, Thompson returned home with a doubtfully sound classical background but no purpose in life.

Young Thompson supinely offered no objection when his father sent him to medical school in Manchester. He commuted there daily from Ashton, but having no interest in medicine soon stopped attending classes and demonstrations; he spent his day loitering around Manchester. He failed his examinations after two years; not surprisingly, he failed after another two years, but by this time he was addicted to laudanum. He failed a third time in 1885 after "attending" medical school for six years. Some form of personality deterioration must have been evident, for his father accused him of drinking. The "failed medico" denied it, but there must have been a scene and an ultimatum, for he left home the following day, procured a liberal supply of laudanum in Manchester, then set off for London.

It is reasonable to conjecture that addiction to opium helped him

bridge the gap between ambition and accomplishment. Though his father would not have opposed a literary career, Thompson was afraid to admit his literary ambitions to his father or anyone else, lest he be encouraged in them and fail, even as he had at his trial for the priesthood. Alone and rudderless in London, Thompson became a derelict until he was "discovered" by Wilfred and Alice Meynell in 1888. The Meynells arranged for him to enter a hospital, take the "cure" and then, through their connections with the hierarchy, for Thompson to stay at a monastery as a "guest." For the next decade, his most productive years, he lived at one monastery or another, interspersing his visits with sporadic journeys to London. When in London for any time, he would revert to laudanum. In this manner he wrote *Poems* (1893) and *New Poems* (1897). Most of his poems were written while he was at these monasteries and not taking opium daily; technically, Alice Meynell was correct when she claimed they were not written under the influence of drugs. Thompson's fantasies were elaborated by opium rather than produced by it; he was a natural dreamer. The hallucinatory imagery and religious ideation were committed to paper some time after they had been experienced. Reid[11] says bluntly that Thompson turned to poetry as a substitute for opium; however, the opium liberated his consciousness for poetry.

Thompson developed a friendship with Coventry Patmore, and the older poet, well-established and secure, served as a father-substitute for him. Unfortunately, Patmore died suddenly in 1896, as did Thompson's real father later that year. In 1897 Thompson left the monastery in Wales, where he had been sheltered for several years, and returned to London and to opium. His poetic output declined sharply; he supported himself and his addiction by writing articles, reviews, and hack books. He returned to monastic walls in 1906, wasted and dying. On his deathbed he confessed to Meynell, "I am dying of opium poisoning!" But, like most of his attempts at self-dramatization, the statement was false; he died of tuberculosis.

Like Coleridge, DeQuincey, and Crabbe, Thompson suffered from nightmares. In a letter to Everard Meynell, the son of his editor and his later biographer, Thompson wrote: ". . . a most miserable fortnight of torpid, despondent days, and affrightful nights, dreams having been in part the worst realities of my life." Abrams[3] has already described the hallucinatory content of Thompson's prose fantasy, *Finis Coronat*

Opus, in which the guilt-ridden hero, like Crabbe's Sir Eustace Grey, is tormented by dreams of horror and terror, including visual and auditory hallucinations. His use of the words "illimitable" and "boundless" suggest the effect of opium on his perception of space; in another poem he alludes to God as the "King of infinite space."

A striking example of synesthesia is seen in his *Ode to the Setting Sun*, written in 1889 shortly after his first refuge in a monastery, coincident with his first real withdrawal from opium for several years:

> Thy visible music-blasts make deaf the sky,
> Thy cymbals clang to fire the Occident,
> Thou dost thy dying so triumphantly:
> I *see* the crimson blaring of the shawms!

Another poem rich in narcotic fantasy is *The Poppy*, a lyric dedicated to Monica Meynell, one of his editor's children. The gaudy hallucinatory palette describes the opium-giving flower as leaving its "flushed print" on the earth like a "yawn of fire" which the wind puffs to "flapping flame." The poppy with its "burnt mouth, red as a lion's" is called "this withering flower of dreams," and the poem closes with a precognition of his fate; the poppy signifies both the instrument of his release and his destruction.

However, a wider response to the effects of opium is seen in *The Hound of Heaven*, probably his best known work. The familiar opening lines depict the poet being pursued by his God:

> I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
> I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
> I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
> *Of my own mind*. . . . [My italics.]

Thompson leaves no doubt that the pursuit and flight are products of his own ideation. He fancies himself chased by a dog, and after many lines of disordered imagery and neologisms, the poet reveals his posture in relation to his God as: "Naked I wait Thy love's uplifted stroke!" This is an expression of the most masochistic attitude ever adopted by any poet who has written in English, even beyond the customary limits of self-flagellation or martyrdom.

Despite Thompson's ability to create unusually vivid descriptions of both natural and imagined objects, the Hound itself is never clearly depicted; it is a presence. Not only the selection of a dog as God's image, but the fact that he could not bring himself to supply a shred

of physical imagery about this symbol, is revealing. In real life Thompson was deathly afraid of dogs. Patmore's son wrote in later years: "Francis Thompson often stayed with us. Great poet though he was, I fear I had but a poor idea of him, a weakly little man . . . he had a peculiar dread of dogs, and as he could not hide his terror of our retriever Nelson, I regret to say that my only feeling for him was unmixed contempt." The only item lacking to reify the paraphernalia of Gothic fantasy is a voice from the wings saying, "Mr. Holmes, they were the footprints of a gigantic hound!"

One reason why Thompson's poetry has declined in reputation in recent years is that his long and profound addiction to opium released into his writing not only the vivid imagery of hallucination but also the ill-formed, distorted attitudes of a weak, indecisive, withdrawn personality which was, by virtue of upbringing and later environment, obsessed with religion to the point of religiosity. His talent was more profoundly damaged by narcotic addiction than that of any other English poet.

John Keats

It will come as a surprise to most readers to find John Keats (1795-1821) included among the opium-eaters. Keats was not an addict, and his use of laudanum was only occasional. However, he was trained and licensed as an apothecary (the equivalent of a general practitioner of today); there is documentary evidence of possession from one source and usage from another. The effects of opium on his poetry can be found in the imagery and ideational content of his *Ode to a Nightingale* as well as in a few other poems to a lesser degree. It is not likely that Keats was influenced to take laudanum by Coleridge, whom he met but once, nor is there any reason to think he was acquainted with DeQuincey, whose *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* were not published until late in 1821, months after Keats' death.

Keats' short, unhappy life is too familiar to require detailed restatement. His father died in 1804 and his mother in 1810; the orphaned lad was apprenticed to a surgeon at Edmonton in 1811 when he was 16. In 1814 he broke his apprenticeship and went to London to study medicine at Guy's and St. Thomas' Hospitals, which were then combined for teaching purposes. He received his certificate as an apothecary in July 1816, and continued intermittent attendance as a dresser at

Guy's until well into 1817, when he decided to abandon medicine and devote himself to literature. Although his medical notes in anatomy and physiology have been preserved and published, there is no documentary evidence of what he studied in materia medica. We must infer that he was acquainted with the clinical use of opiates and their effects, as the drug was then freely prescribed for all manner of ills, and he must surely have spoken with patients who had received it.

In 1818 Keats' younger brother Tom developed pulmonary tuberculosis; Keats nursed him devotedly, living in the same small room with him until the boy died in December of that year. There is no doubt that Keats himself contracted tuberculosis from this prolonged and intimate contact. Although the dramatic episode of his sudden hemoptysis on February 3, 1820, provides us with a date for the definite establishment of pulmonary infection, Keats' letters indicate that he had preclinical symptoms well before that time. As early as the autumn of 1818 while Tom was still alive, he complained of a persistent sore throat, which progressed with only transient remissions through the winter, spring, summer, and autumn of 1819. The sore throat by itself is a nonspecific symptom, and it certainly cannot suggest tuberculosis laryngitis, which would be a late complication, but it became associated with progressive malaise, a low-grade intermittent fever, and tightness in the chest, which are more suggestive. There is no documentary evidence that Keats took opiates at this time for relief, nor is there any documentation regarding the medications prescribed for Tom.

Although Keats tried to present a brave face to his friends after Tom's death, he was emotionally depressed and poetically unproductive during January, February, and March of 1819. He moved into the house owned by his friend Charles Armitage Brown. In an effort to relieve his low spirits, he went out on March 18, 1819, with some friends to play cricket and was hit in the eye by a cricket ball. W. J. Bate[12] informs us that Brown "had a little opium and gave him some of it that evening as a palliative." However, in a letter to his elder brother George, then seeking his fortune in America, Keats wrote:[13] "Yesterday I got a black eye—the first time I took a Cricket bat—Brown who is always one's friend in a disaster applied a leech to the eyelid and there is no inflammation this morning. . . ." A few lines further in this journal letter, dated March 19th, Keats records a feeling of lassitude on the morning after:

> This morning I am in a sort of temper indolent and supremely careless—I long after a stanza or two of Thomson's *Castle of Indolence*—my passions are all asleep from my having slumbered till nearly eleven and weakened the animal fibre all over me to a delightful sensation about three degrees this side of faintness—if I had teeth of pearl and the breath of lillies I should call it langour—but as I am* I must call it laziness—in this state of effeminacy the fibres of the brain are relaxed in common with the rest of the body, and to such a happy degree that pleasure has no show of enticement and pain no unbearable frown. Neither Poetry, nor Ambition, nor Love have any alertness of countenance as they pass by me: they seem rather like the figures on a Greek vase—a Man and two women—whom no one but myself could distinguish in their disguisement.

It is unusual to sleep late after a painful injury to the eye, and the feeling of relaxation and indifference to the usual stimuli for pain or pleasure are certainly consistent with the after effects of a single dose of laudanum; one would scarcely expect them from a leech. The allusion to figures on a Greek vase might bear some relationship to the *Ode to a Grecian Urn* written in May, about two months later. However, the entire passage seems more directly related to the *Ode on Indolence*, probably written at about this time:

> One morn before me were three figures seen, ...
> They pass'd, like figures on a marble urn, ...
> Ripe was the drowsy hour;
> The blissful cloud of summer-indolence
> Benumb'd my eyes; my pulse grew less and less;
> Pain had no sting, and pleasure's wreath no flower.

The figures pass by Keats' eye as the urn seems to resolve slowly, and there is a sense of slowed motion and time in addition to the diminution of the pulse and the abolition of pain and pleasure which are more specifically similar to the known effects of opium.

By contrast, the phrase "Drowsed with the fume of poppies" in the *Ode to Autumn* composed in October 1819 bears only a tenuous relation to opium usage, as the metaphor is not pursued nor related to any of the other known effects of the drug. It is the sort of image which might occur to any Romantic poet, especially one trained as an apothecary. If any of Keats' poems shows the effects of opium usage, it is

*"Especially as I have a black eye."

the *Ode to a Nightingale*, written in late April or early May of 1819, about six weeks after the incident of the cricket ball.

Yet even a month after Keats received the black eye and its treatment by leech or opium (or both), his journal-letter to his brother George records on April 16th[14] a dream which bears a striking similarity to those reported after opium, mescaline, psilocybin, and LSD:

> The fifth canto of Dante pleases me more and more—it is the one in which he meets Paulo and Francesca—I had passed many days in a rather low state of mind and in the midst of them I dreamt of being in that region of Hell—I floated about the whirling atmosphere as it is described with a beautiful figure to whose lips mine were join'd as it seem'd for an age—and in the midst of all this cold and darkness I was warm—even flowery tree tops sprung up and we rested on them sometimes with the lightness of a cloud till the wind blew us away again—I tried a Sonnet upon it—there are fourteen lines but nothing of what I felt in it—O that I could dream it every night.

The sonnet was the one beginning "As Hermes once took to his feathers light." It contains no internal evidence of the effect of drugs, but Keats himself wrote that it contained nothing of the sensations he experienced in the dream. Inability to communicate in words the nature of the narcotic experience, the *indicible* nature of the images and ideas, is a constant theme in the literature on drug effects. In the dream Keats says he felt warm despite the cold and darkness around him; this may be construed as a disorder of the sensorium, but that would be stretching a point. Likewise, one may dream of floating in space and being blown by the wind without having recourse to opiates. The evidence furnished by the dream content is suggestive but not specific.

George Keats returned to England for a brief visit in January 1820. He was under considerable financial pressure, and it was rather a tense time for his family and friends. Keats was living in Brown's house during most of this period, and Brown's memoir, written about 1840 to 1841, alludes specifically to Keats' use of laudanum. Though Brown's dating leaves much to be desired, the context indicates that the events occurred at about the time of George's visit, i.e., shortly before the first hemoptysis on February 3, 1820. Brown[15] records that

> . . . he began to be reckless of health. Among other proofs of recklessness, he was secretly taking, at times, a few drops of laudanum to keep up his spirits. It was discovered by accident, and, without

> delay, revealed to me. He needed not to be warned of the danger of such a habit; but I rejoiced at his promise never to take another drop without my knowledge; for nothing could induce him to break his word, when once given.

By January 1820 Keats certainly had symptoms which in retrospect presaged the overt development of pulmonary tuberculosis, and he may have been taking the laudanum not only to keep up his spirits but as self-medication for his symptoms. Regrettably, Brown's memoir is silent regarding the incident of the cricket ball and the possibility of his having given Keats a single dose of opium as a palliative in the preceding March.

The only other documentary evidence linking Keats with opium is supplied in a letter from Rome dated January 25 and 26, 1821, written by Joseph Severn, the young artist who had accompanied Keats there when he left England in September 1820. Apparently Keats had procured a bottle of opium, probably as tincture of laudanum, shortly before sailing. In his letter addressed to Joseph Taylor, Keats' publisher, Severn[16] writes:

> The hardest point between us is that cursed bottle of Opium—he had determined on taking this the instant his recovery should stop—he says to save him the extended misery of a long illness—in his own mind he saw this fatal prospect—the dismal night—the impossibility of receiving any sort of comfort—and above all the wasting of his body and helplessness—these he had determined on escaping—and but for me—he would have swallowed this draught 3 months since—in the ship—he says 3 wretched months have I kept him alive.

The letter establishes possession, hints at a suicidal gesture in September, but confirms the fact that Keats was not an addict, for even though he suffered all the misery he sought to avoid, he could not bring himself to use the bottle which was at hand. Keats died a month after Severn's letter was written.

Having established possession and use of opium in 1820, and having a strong suggestion of at least a single therapeutic dose in March 1819, one more speculative comment may be added. A person who uses opium tends to conceal his practice. Brown states that Keats' use of laudanum was secret. Also, in none of the 70 letters written *after* his first hemoptysis from February through November 1820, when he became too weak to write, does Keats mention any specific medication by name,

though his letters are filled with reports of visits from his physicians, accounts of his symptoms, and the advice his physicians gave him. In a man with medical training such reticence hints that he may have had something to conceal.

Like Coleridge's *Kubla Khan,* the *Ode to a Nightingale* was written in a single burst of inspiration. Brown's memoir[17] recounts the circumstances:

> In the spring of 1819 a nightingale had built her nest near my house. Keats felt a tranquil and continual joy in her song; and one morning he took his chair from the breakfast-table to the grass-plot under a plum-tree, where he sat for two or three hours. When he came into the house, I perceived he had some scraps of paper in his hand, and these he was quietly thrusting behind the books. On inquiry, I found those scraps, four or five in number, contained his poetic feeling on the song of our nightingale.

We must accept the poem as the expression of a unified frame of mind and emotional attitude. There is every reason to believe that the final form does not differ greatly from the first inspired draft.

The opening four lines of the poem are pharmacologically explicit:

> My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains*
> My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
> Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
> One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk.

Cruel as it is to paraphrase, Keats tells us that he feels depressed, that his sensorium is obtunded as if he had just taken a drug. He mentions hemlock, which does not produce this effect, despite its association with Socrates, and opiates which do so. Sinking "Lethe-wards" implies that he has entered an amnesic, trancelike state. In this trance he hears, or thinks he hears, the nightingale, the "light-winged Dryad of the trees," singing of the approaching summer in "full-throated ease." Whether or not the nightingale's song is an auditory hallucination is a question Keats never fully resolves. Brown's account does inform us that there was, at least, a real nightingale. But there is no room for doubt that Keats does compare his mood and state of sensory apperception to a drug-induced trance.

In the next stanza the poet seeks to escape from a world of stern

*The original manuscript in the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge shows that Keats' first approximation of the opening line read "My heart aches and a painful numbless falls . . ."—an incipit which he quickly rejected.

reality: "That I might drink and leave this world unseen," the constant motive and plea of escapists from time immemorial. Keats does not specify precisely what he wishes to escape; biographically, it could have been any number of problems or the concerted impact of many. Opiates having served their initial purpose in the poem, the induction of the trance, the quick and ready route for escape is alcohol, specifically wine:

O for a draught of vintage. . . .
O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stainèd mouth. . . .

At this point one begins to question the accuracy of his visual imagery. The allusion to Hippocrene is to a spring on Mount Helicon from which the Muses drank and received inspiration. A very apposite allusion indeed, but surely the waters of Hippocrene* are crystal clear, not "purple-stainèd." Has not the poet added, while in an opium trance, an hallucinated color? Fogle[18] considers this stanza to contain the finest example of synesthesia in all of Keats' poems.

The plea for escape, amnesia, and depersonalization continues in the third stanza, but this time Keats specifies some memories he would like to escape:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou amongst the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies.

This image recalls Keats' own experiences in hospitals and fuses them with recollections of the recent death of his brother. His wish to forget such depressing scenes is not unreasonable, but he does manage to telescope the hospital images of 1816 with the more recent illness

*The name Hippocrene is derived from the Greek, *hippo,* horse + *krene,* meaning fountain or stream. The legend has it that Pegasus stamped his hoof upon the ground and that at that place a sparkling stream arose, hence the name, and hence its attribution as a source of poetic inspiration. Possibly Keats was confusing Hippocrene with hippocras, the 'wine of Hippocrates,' a cordial made of wine flavored with spices, usually strained through a conical sieve or a bag of linen or flannel. Hippocras was known to Chaucer who mentions it in *The Merchant's Tale:*

He drynketh Ypocras Clarree and Vernage
Of spices hoote tencressen his corage.

The comparative endocrinologist must avoid the pitfall of deriving Hippocrene from *hippo,* horse + *krinein,* to secrete, the latter being the root for exocrine, endocrine, and allied terms. Horses do have many secretions, some of particular interest to endocrinologists, but none of them is purplish. The only potable which might qualify would be Hospices de Beaune, a decent Burgundy, but Keats, like Chaucer's merchant, was fond of claret. In any case, Hippocrene is not purple; Keats' imagination (or vision) endowed it with that tinctorial quality.

and death of his brother late in 1818, not unlike the distortion of time which occurs in drug-induced trances.

In the fourth stanza Keats banishes such melancholy ideas and gives voice to a desire to join the nightingale and be identified with her:

Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards.

Now abjuring the fruit of the vine as a source of inspiration, he affirms his poetic gift and seeks escape on the invisible wings of the poetic imagination. In this endeavor he is partly hindered by a "dull brain," which one may equate with the "drowsy numbness" induced by the opiate. Even as sensory perception is somewhat obtunded by drugs, so mental processes may be also retarded. It is a comment on a mind partially drugged, yet not so deeply as to be unaware of the effects on its higher mental processes.

Although the poem was written in the clear daylight of a spring morning, Keats now develops the idea of darkness—"But here there is no light," a phrase which might be consistent with sinking more deeply into the trance. He dimly senses a garden of flowers and an undefinable scent in the atmosphere around him:

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs.

Havelock Ellis[2] described similar visions of flowers and a "vague perfume" after taking mescal extract, but Keats goes beyond that level of perception when he describes the soft tactile quality of the incense and pictures it hanging physically on a bough, a striking example of synesthesia. The fantasy continues, and Keats has thoughts of death, death as an escape from both his vision and from reality:

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain.

It is scarcely necessary to point out that the primary medicinal purpose of taking opium is to alleviate pain.

In the penultimate stanza Keats declares the nightingale to be immortal; "the self-same song" that Ruth heard "amid the alien corn" is the same song Keats hears in his trancelike state. This auditory hallucination, telescoped in time, opens his eyes through "charmed magic casements" to additional visions of "perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn." The notion of perilous seas is not sufficiently definite to be equated with

the visions of infinite space and boundless, bourneless bodies of water so common in narcotic hallucinations. Possibly stronger and more frequent dosage is necessary to evoke a more evident hallucination of spatial distortion. However, the "faery lands" do anticipate Baudelaire's artificial paradises. Keats came closer to the typical vision of limitless space in the "whirling atmosphere" of the Dante-inspired dream of April 15 and 16. The visual correlative for Keats with his lips joined to those of the diaphanous creature of the dream would resemble one of Blake's illustrations for the *Divine Comedy*. The girl of Keats' dream seems to bear no relation to Fanny Brawne, whose very name suggests something solid and earthbound rather than an ethereal, freely floating maiden with linear flowing drapery envisioned by Blake. Keats does suggest a vision of infinite space in *The Fall of Hyperion* written at the end of 1819 in which he takes a draught of an unspecified potion and falls into a "cloudy swoon." On this occasion he states that the hallucinogen is "no Asian poppy or elixir fine," but its effect seems much the same. In this trance he dreams he is in sort of Levantine or quasi-Egyptian sanctuary of incredibly vast proportions.

> Builded so high, it seem'd that filmed clouds
> Might spread beneath, as o'er the stars of heaven.

As he surveys his surroundings, he raises his eyes

> . . . to fathom the space every way;
> The embossed roof, the silent massy range
> Of columns north and south, ending in mist
> Of nothing, ...

undeniably a drug-induced vision of expanded space. Weir Mitchell[1] describes a similar vision of a Gothic castle after taking extract of mescal buttons, and common to both visions is the imagery of a collection of specifically mentioned bright objects within the hallucinated building. Keats describes:

> Robes, golden tongs, censer, and chafing-dish,
> Girdles, and chains, and holy jewelries.

Returning from this "perilous sea" and "faery land" of magic and enchantment, we encounter the word *forlorn*. This word has a particular valence for Keats, and he echoes it for emphasis in the next line which opens the final stanza:

> Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
> To toll me back from thee to my sole self!

Here we have for the first time an explicit statement of the poet's alienation or, to use a more homely, less fashionable word, his loneliness. The word recalls the poet from listening dreamily to the nightingale's song to his *sole self*. Both the word and the recall are put in the form of exclamations. As the nightingale's "plaintive anthem fades," Keats is brought back from his trance to solipsism and narcissism, two of the most prominent traits in the oversimplified psyche of a person who uses drugs. (The addict tries to solve his diverse, complex problems by reducing them to only one problem, namely getting his daily fix.) In much the same fashion Keats tried to reduce all the complex problems in his life—his illness, his unfulfilled love for Fanny Brawne, his economic uncertainties, his manifold relations with his friends—into one existential act, the writing of poetry as a way of escape—". . . for I will fly to thee . . . on the viewless wings of Poesy." Though Keats did not habitually use drugs, his mechanism of escape is comparable, and he projects this into consciousness in the *Ode to a Nightingale;* the poem takes its departure from the frame of mind and affect induced by "some dull opiate."

In this respect Keats shows features in common with contemporary users of psychedelic drugs. Even as early as the first book of *Endymion*, which he began writing in the spring of 1817, a year before his brother's illness, we find him writing

> Wherein lies happiness? In that which becks
> Our ready minds to fellowship divine,
> A fellowship with essence; till we shine,
> Full alchemiz'd, and free of space. Behold
> The clear religion of heaven!

Contemporary readers will not find this entirely alien to the nirvana described by individuals who go on "trips" together by using LSD. Surely, persons who use LSD have been "full alchemiz'd" and are "free of space." Keats was able to conceive of such a state even without the use of drugs.

As the effect of the drug begins to wear off, the poet comes out of his trance. Keats then asks what can be taken as a perfectly reasonable question, the sort of question any patient might ask on recovering from an anesthetic, a hypnotic, or a narcotic:

> Was it a vision or a waking dream?
> Fled is that music:—do I wake or sleep?

It is precisely at this point, the recovery phase, that the perception of reality is likely to be confused. There are no longer any visions or hallucinations, but there is disorientation as to time, place, and the real nature of one's surroundings. The patient is not quite sure that he is fully conscious. A hint of similar sensory confusion can be found in one of George Crabbe's newly discovered poems:[19]

> Where am I now? I slept to wake again,
> And to forget.

Crabbe was addicted to opium in moderate dosage for many years and paid the price for it by having recurrent dreams of persecution and flight. He probably had more to forget or repress than Keats, but Keats, the better poet by far, has phrased the sensation of the trance more tellingly.

The *Ode to a Nightingale* is, then, a poem which, among other matters, describes a trancelike state containing several of the experiences that are known to follow the ingestion of opium. Keats was medically trained and cognizant of the effects of opium. There is evidence that he may have been given or had taken a single dose of opium for medicinal purposes prior to the date of the poem's composition. There is no evidence that the poem was a conscious attempt to recreate a narcotic experience, but its content suggests that Keats had had such an experience and drew upon it. There is documentary evidence that Keats had possession of and used opium in the form of laudanum after the *Ode to a Nightingale* was written; there are passages in other poems which tend to support this view. There is no evidence for, and every evidence in contradiction of, any notion that Keats was an addict or used opiates with any frequency, even in the terminal stages of his illness.

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